

Coin biz: From peaks to the pits

By Roger Boye

The rare coin business is in the doldrums, say several dealers who report fewer-than-normal sales and softening "collector prices" for some types of old coins.

Experts blame the slowdown on high interest rates, lower gold and silver prices compared with 1980, and a natural leveling-off period following last year's boom market (prices for some rare coins went up 50 per cent or more in 1980).

"It's a lot different now from last winter," said one Chicago coin store owner. "At the peak of the silver boom, people were lined up on the street waiting to get in here."

This year, with silver selling for less than \$15 an ounce (it was nearly \$50 an ounce early in 1980), dealers are wanting for business.

"I'm thinking of putting up a dart board to give me something to do," admitted another dealer, who did not want his name used. "I've had just four customers in here all morning, and only one of them bought anything."

Some dealers say that silver dollars and commemorative half-dollars remain in demand, but that prices of many proof coins and uncirculated pieces have dropped a little from their 1980 highs.

The soft market has forced at least three large national coin companies to reduce the size of their staffs, according to reports in hobby newspapers. One of the firms, International Coins and Currency Inc. of Montpelier, Vt., filed for bankruptcy on Feb. 9; it had laid off about half of its 160-person work force on New Year's Eve.

● Do you want to collect world coins, but need

some help?

Sponsors of the sixth annual Chicago International Coin Fair have set up a free, one-hour introductory course starting at 3 p.m. March 14. It's designed to acquaint novices and would-be investors with the basic resources needed to start a collection of coins and currency from different countries.

Instructors will include Russell Rulau of Iola, Wis., and David T. Alexander of Sidney, Ohio, two well-known hobby experts. The class will be held in the Hyatt Regency Chicago, 151 E. Wacker Dr., site of the three-day coin fair.

At least 3,000 persons are expected to attend the fair, as well as about 125 well-established coin dealers from 11 different countries. The dealers will buy and sell coins from a huge sales area to be set up in the hotel.

Also, many rare coins will be sold during the fair in a three-session auction to be conducted by Chicago's Rare Coin Co. of America.

Admission is free to all activities and to the meetings of eight coin clubs to be held at the hotel during the fair. The sales area will be open from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. March 13 and 14, and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 15.

● Much to the delight of paper-money collectors, the U.S. government may once again sell uncut sheets of currency to hobbyists.

If plans are approved, each sheet would contain 32 \$1 bills of the type currently printed for circulation. The Bureau of Engraving and Printing — the government agency that makes currency — last sold uncut sheets in the 1950s.

Each sheet of 32 bills would cost about \$35 if purchased over-the-counter in Washington, D.C., or about \$40 if ordered through the mail. Sales could begin this summer.

The government normally prints currency on large sheets of paper, 32 bills to the sheet. In the last step of the printing process, machines cut the sheets to form individual bills.